

# THE COUNSELOR

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## THE BLENDED FAMILY

Second and third marriages are occurring at a phenomenal rate today. Approximately 1300 new step-families (blended families) are formed every day in the U.S. At this rate, by the year 2010 there will be more blended families in the U.S. than any other type of family. About 65% of remarriages involve children from previous marriages. One out of every 6 children under the age of 18 is a step-child. One out of every 3 Americans is now a step-parent, step-child, step-sibling or some member of a step-family. More than half of Americans today have been, or will be, in one or more step-situations during their lives.

These unique, ready-made families come together with their own histories and issues to form a complex mixture of challenges. His children, her children, and oftentimes, their children combine to roll three families into one. Typical comments from blended families include:

- My kids won't obey their step-father.
- The girls resist their step-mother.
- You're not my father!
- I don't have to listen to you.
- There's too much tension in our new marriage.

Divided loyalties, personality clashes, discipline problems, anger, frustration, confusion, and disappointment consume many blended families. Marital tension increases as conflicts escalate. Blended families can, however, make adjustments, move through the challenging times and enjoy a good family life.



## *Dynamics and Challenges: The Blend*

Born out of loss, step-families blend together an assortment of different families, personalities, and backgrounds. The merger encompasses everyone's histories, perceptions, family experiences, unfinished business, and unique needs. These factors combine to create a variety of stresses and strains as the new family struggles to adapt. Oftentimes the parents find themselves struggling hard, trying to make the blend work. For example, one mom desperately wants her child to warm up to and accept her new husband. She tries hard to please both and finds herself in the middle. She feels torn between her deject-



ed, sullen, husband and angry, rejecting child. The stepfather feels defeated because his step-child won't obey or connect with him. Mother feels responsible and totally worn out, wondering if the marriage was a mistake. Everyone feels like they are on a roller coaster ride of good times and bad times. The more people involved, the greater the pressures. Each individual has specific needs, fears, and concerns. Children often feel like they will be lost and replaced by the blending.

## *Relationships with Ex-Spouses*

The absent parent exerts a strong influence on the blended family. Children carry emotional impressions from bonding with their biological parents. They remember



the interactions, fun times and bad times, the joy and hurts in their relationship with the absent parent. A significant source of their identity comes from the absent parent. The things that the absent parent tells his children affect the step-family. Children who rarely or never see their biological parents are still impacted by their own positive and negative feelings, and thoughts of the missing parent. Therefore, it is extremely important that divorced parents strive to keep good, working relationships with their ex-spouses. Good ex-spouse relationships facilitate healing in the children.

## *Conflict*

Many families try to force everyone to accept one another quickly and develop great relationships. Conflict is a natural part of the blending. Everyone involved had their own unique place, routine, and position in their previous lifestyle. Imagine a jar of water and sand. The sand is settled at the bottom, but when you shake it up the mixture becomes cloudy. This is what happens when the ingredients of two families are thrown together. It takes time for the new mixture to settle. Family photos, trips, vacations, forced time together and discussions about how "we are a new family," take place. Conflicts, feelings of loss, and regret are normal in blended families.

## Premarriage Expectations

Many couples preparing to blend their families have the following unrealistic expectations:

- Everyone will experience the same overwhelming love and affection that we feel for one another.
- Our new family will be better than our previous families.
- We won't ever have to deal with the same conflicts and hurts again...we will do it right.
- Our children will be as happy as we are about their new family.
- Discipline will not be a problem. A firm, tough approach will prevail against any defiance of the rules.

## Building A Solid Blended Family



## Husband/Wife Relationship

A solid blended family begins with a strong marital relationship and commitment to weather the storms of step-family life. The husband and wife must stand together against the pull to fragment the family. First, they need to develop trust. They are the pillars for the entire family. The quality of their relationship makes all the difference. They need to strengthen their bond. They should go out to dinner, the movies, and special outings alone, away from the children. They must understand step-family issues and learn conflict resolution. Conflict and chaos will occur as the children compete for attention and try to dissolve the family. A solid spiritual base for both husband and wife fortifies their marriage relationship. A marriage based on God enables parents to draw from His strength and principles for rearing healthy children. Parents should seize every opportunity to learn more effective ways to grow their step-family.

## Step-parent/Child Relationship

Step-parents should develop relationships with their step-children slowly. Relationships take time to develop. They should move gradually from being on the sidelines to taking a supportive role, rather than jumping right in as chief disciplinarian. Step-parents can expect tension, anger, frustration, setbacks, and difficulty in establishing bonds with step-children. Some relationships are easier than others, depending on the children's post divorce adjustment, their relationship with their biological parents, and the amount of pain or emotional baggage they carry from their first family. The non-custodial parent can do much to help their children connect with the step-parents. They can encourage them to develop friendships with their step-parents and assure them, that by doing so, they will not lose their original parents. Non-custodial parents can also help their children with the transition by interacting positively with their children's step-parents.



their families. The new unit takes time to adjust and settle in. Step-parents should take on disciplinary roles very slowly. Brief family meetings are recommended to discuss issues, and increase communication and understanding among everyone. Tolerance and flexibility are key. Meshing takes time and does not happen along a straight line. There will be ups and downs. Step-families should also move slowly in combining traditions and rituals.

## The Blended Family Unit: Meshing Together

When two families come together, there are bound to be disagreements, conflict and dissension. Everyone struggles to establish their own place sense of identity and. The merging together evokes feelings of loss. Instability, anxiety, and insecurity prevail. Children and parents experience insecurity in the meshing together of

## The Future ...

Blended family life can be good. Loving relationships and healing can take place. All step-families pass through trials and tribulations. The process usually presents incredible challenges, but remember, through great challenges come great victories. Blended families can promote a legacy of generational healing and blessings for its members.

## F.Y.I.

References for the statistics on blended families come from Visher and Visher (1997), Larson (1992), and Deal (1998).

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